

Ethical Standards Advisory #21

MISINFORMATION

ISSUE

Misinformation undermines trust, erodes communication channels and significantly disrupts our democracy, economy, workplaces and communities. In this ESA-21, the term *misinformation* includes *disinformation* and *malinformation*.

BACKGROUND

Our First Amendment freedoms that include freedom of speech and freedom of the press are essential to our democracy. Research shows a wide majority of Americans view disinformation as a serious threat to democracy, as well as the economy. Information that misinforms or deliberately misleads the public pollutes the information highway and undermines informed decision-making. A growing number of Americans rely on “news” sources that threaten the public interest by disseminating information that is partial, inaccurate, lacks transparency and, in some cases, is harmful. Managing false information isn’t new, but with digital media, misinformation can spread faster than ever, and the effects can be far-reaching with devastating impact.

The Federal Trade Commission (1914) and the Federal Communications Commission (1934), the two government agencies charged with regulatory oversight of communication in the United States, have on occasion updated their guidance with new interpretations of existing laws and regulations to apply to this new media environment. As strategy-focused public relations professionals committed to building trusted relationships, we must slow down and ultimately eliminate the exchange of misinformation. Public relations professionals are uniquely qualified to address disinformation and must shift from defense to offense, fulfill their ethical obligation and help consumers of news and information make better decisions both online and off.

Related Materials

- [FTC Releases Advertising Disclosures Guidance for Online Influencers](#) (*Federal Trade Commission*, Dec. 19, 2019)
- [FTC Issues Enforcement Policy Statement Addressing “Native” Advertising and Deceptively Formatted Advertisements](#) (*Federal Trade Commission*, Dec. 22, 2015)
- [FTC Staff Revises Online Advertising Disclosure Guidelines](#) (*Federal Trade Commission*, March 12, 2013)

DEFINITIONS

From PRSA’s [Voices4Everyone](#); check for regular updates on misinformation

- **Misinformation** is false information though not created with negative intent.
 - [Misinformation vs. Disinformation: A Simple Comparison](#) (YourDictionary)
- **Disinformation** is false information specially created to confuse, misinform, and harm a person or group.
 - [Students across US take on Covid disinformation](#) (R. McPheters, *VOA*, Aug. 9, 2021)
- **Malinformation** is information based on reality but created deliberately to inflict harm on a person or group.
 - [Broadcasting false information](#) (*Federal Communications Commission*, Jan. 8, 2020)

Related Materials

- [Countering the falsehoods of information disorder](#) (K. Nauman. *PRSA Strategies & Tactics*, June-July 2021)
- [Disinformation](#) (N. Larsen, M. Chersonon. *PRSA*, Strategic Initiative, 2021)
- [Disinformation, media literacy](#), (*PRSA*, Strategic Initiative, Media literacy tools, 2021)
- [Misinformation/Disinformation](#), Research Library, *Institute for Public Relations*, 2021)

RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE PRSA CODE

At least three Code provisions and five Professional Values relate to this issue.

Code Provisions

- 1. Disclosure of Information.** Be honest and accurate in all communications. Avoid deceptive practices.
- 2. Conflicts of Interests.** Avoid actions and circumstances that may appear to compromise good business judgment or create a conflict between personal and professional interests.
- 3. Enhancing the Profession.** Build respect and credibility with the public for the profession of public relations.

Professional Values

Advocacy is a professional value relevant to the discussion of misinformation because responsible *advocacy* requires consideration of both the client/employer's interests as well as the interests of affected publics. The PRSA value of *independence* helps resolve conflicts. Appropriate communication doesn't deceive stakeholders or contribute to declining public trust. Instead, it contributes to the free flow of accurate, truthful information and preserves the integrity of the communications process. (Source: 2021 APR Study Guide, page 105.)

- 1. Advocacy:** We serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid informed public debate.
- 2. Honesty.** We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public.
- 3. Independence.** We provide objective counsel to those we represent. We are accountable for our actions.
- 4. Loyalty.** We are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve the public interest.
- 5. Fairness.** We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.

EXAMPLES OF SOLUTIONS

1. Misinformation with unintentional misinterpretation of research by a client

You write a speech for a client based on an interview with him about research findings on a specific issue. You realize the client misinterpreted a research study to include only findings that support a specific position.

Actions

- Share the full study with the client and correct the speech as needed.
- As PR counsel for the client, explain that using only accurate information will help preserve the client's credibility.

Example

- [Washington Examiner op-ed cherry-picks data and misleads readers about climate models](#) (*Science Feedback*, Aug. 31, 2019)

2. Disinformation – false information deliberately used to confuse or harm

A grassroots nonprofit group eager to promote alternative treatments for COVID-19 interviews hospital chief executive officers who speak in favor of following science for treating any disease. The business development team at the nonprofit edits the videos to develop one-minute sound bites in which the hospital executives appear to endorse alternative treatments with no mention of science-based guidance. As the PR leader for the nonprofit, you must deal with the backlash from the media plus the hospital CEOs interviewed who demand the removal of the sound bites and release of accurate information from their interviews.

Actions

- Using the PRSA Code of Ethics as your guide, share best practices in ethical communications.
- Explain the legal and reputational danger in editing content to create inaccurate messages that damage credibility, tarnish the organization's reputation, and fracture its relationships with the media and the public.
- Take down the sound bites from wherever they were posted; contact members of the media who requested an interview with your CEO and explain the situation.
- Consider whether it is appropriate to post either a written or video apology from your CEO.
- Advocate for a seat on the content development and approval team for future statements released publicly.
- Ask for and confirm the commitment from leadership to ethical communications and agreement on what the organization releases publicly.

Example

- [Disinformation for hire, a shadow industry, is quietly booming](#) (M. Fisher, *New York Times*, July 25, 2021)
- [COVID-19 Resources for PR Professionals – Disinformation](#) (*Institute for Public Relations Research*, Nov. 10, 2021)

3. Malinformation for financial gain

A potential new client approaches your PR agency and asks for representation. The company sells a supplement claiming to reduce cholesterol by 25% in six months. They are ready to establish a content development and promotional campaign. When you ask for peer-reviewed research and other data to support the claims, the client tells you the information doesn't exist. They rely on outcomes from the people who use the product. The product website presents sales information and a few testimonials from consumers who say the product works and scientists making the same claim.

Actions

- With the PRSA Code of Ethics as your guide, explain to the potential client that you follow best practices in ethical communications.
- The current information on the website lacks credibility without the requested peer-reviewed research and verified outcomes from users of the product.
- Turn down the new business due to lack of credible information and research on the product.

Examples

- [FTC Seeks to Halt 10 Operators of Fake News Sites from Making Deceptive Claims about Acai Berry](#)

[Weight Loss Products](#) (*Federal Trade Commission*, April 19, 2011)

- [The Financial Drain of Misinformation](#) (K. Stansberry, Ph.D., *PRsay*, April 22, 2021)

4. Reputation and disinformation management

You are a PR practitioner who just joined a company where employees sharing disinformation about the organization with the media and on the corporate website was common practice. The information could harm customers or investors who relied on it as factual. Focused on reputation management, you address the situation by conducting an environmental scan to gather everything that has been said about the organization. Now, you must address the disinformation and the company's dismantled reputation.

Actions

- Using the PRSA Code of Ethics as your guide, share best practices in ethical communications with the CEO and the company's marketing team.
- Review and summarize the disinformation that was shared about the company and the overall danger it represented. Use it as a learning tool to show the right and wrong way to improve an ethical culture.
- Share your findings with the executive management team; gather their input and suggest a plan of action to rebuild the company's reputation.

Examples

- [Social Media Policy Warning: Loose Lips Sink Ships and Can Damage Your Company's Reputation](#), (H. Dennis Beaver, Esq., *Kiplinger*, Jan. 7, 2021)
- [The Consequences of Misinformation](#) (B. Lewis, *PRsay*, March 19, 2021)

RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES

Communicators and public relations professionals strive for balance and fairness to unify, rather than divide, as noted in these best practices.

- Read and verify the validity of sources for information before sharing it.
- Educate all employees, including senior leadership, about media literacy and how to follow media relations and social media policies to minimize risks of spreading false information.
- Identify sponsored or paid content as such, an ethical practice and disclosure that accurately presents published information about your company.
- Use neutral and factual language; avoid using language adopted for division or as intentionally inflammatory, such as "anti-vaxxer."
- Use appropriate language to accurately communicate, rather than soft pedal, the seriousness of a situation, such as "police-involved shooting."
- Invest time and resources in social listening to proactively identify and address the spread of false information by presenting credible sources that share factual information.
- Recognize that you may have to turn down a job opportunity or client if they do not follow best practices.

Data from behavioral sciences are clear. Communicators can play a part in slowing disinformation.

- Advocate for and share [media literacy programs](#), participate in and share [mind-building games](#) to inoculate communicators and others from disinformation and [promote a pause or nudge](#) before sharing content online.

Fact-checking Resources

- [FactCheck.org](#) - Monitors factual accuracy of commentary from major U.S. political players
 - [SciCheck](#) - Focuses on false and misleading scientific claims from partisans to influence public policy
 - [FlackCheck.org](#) - Looks at political literacy
- [Fact Check News from Duke University's Reporters' Lab](#) - Focuses on fact-checking and journalism research
- [International Fact-Checking Network](#) - Promotes excellence in fact-checking with a code of principles for organizations to follow
- [Media Bias/Fact Check](#) - Rates bias, factual accuracy and credibility of media sources
- [OpenSecrets.org](#) - Tracks money in U.S. politics and its effect on elections and public policy
- [PolitiFact](#) - Checks statements from the news for accuracy
- [Snopes.com](#) - Checks multiple topics, including suggestions from consumers

Created: 2021

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